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052179269X - The Emergence of the Eastern Powers, 1756-1775

H. M. Scott

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INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth-century European states system and its transformations

On 17 March 1778 the House of Commons began to consider the treaties between France and Britain's rebellious North American colonists. These had been signed early in February, and their formal communication to London signalled open French intervention in the War of American Independence. In the course of this debate Charles Jenkinson offered an incisive if pessimistic analysis of the predicament facing Britain. Her diplomatic isolation and accompanying political decline, he declared, were due to a wider and quite fundamental transformation:

The great military powers in the interior parts of Europe, who have amassed together their great treasures, and have modelled their subjects into great armies, will in the next and succeeding period of time, become the predominant powers. France and Great Britain, which have been the first and second-rate powers of the European world, will perhaps for the future be but of the third and fourth rate.¹

Though acute, Jenkinson's analysis was too sanguine. During the 1770s Russia, Prussia and Austria, 'the great military powers in the interior parts of Europe', were already becoming the leading continental states: what he termed the 'predominant powers'. Their political rise during the third quarter of the eighteenth century is the subject of this book.

The emergence of the eastern powers was a turning point in the evolution of the modern European states system. During the century after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) international relations had been shaped primarily by attempts to contain the French monarchy, the one true great power of that era. The efforts had been led by the Dutch Republic (until its strength waned after 1713) and, increasingly, by the British state, and supported by Austria. In the generation after the Peace of Utrecht Britain and Austria were more equal in strength to France, until her notable recovery under Cardinal Fleury's leadership during the 1730s. Memories of recent wars, however, ensured that the Anglo-Dutch alliance with Austria continued in its efforts to restrain French might, which was still feared. These three countries had usually been allies between the 1680s and the 1740s. Lesser states had attached themselves to one side or the other in this struggle. Until the second half of the eighteenth

¹ *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (36 vols., London, 1806–20), XIX. col. 948. Jenkinson, subsequently the first Lord Liverpool, was at this point an Under-Secretary of State.

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century this international system extended only over western and central Europe, reflecting the crucial importance of French dominance to its operations.² Large regions in northern, eastern and south-eastern Europe were on its fringes. Sweden had been incorporated during its transient career as a leading state in the seventeenth century. After 1700 Russia's increasing power and her dominant role in Poland gave her enhanced importance, though she only became a full member after the Seven Years War. The international system overlapped with the network of resident diplomacy which linked Europe's leading capitals, but it was not identical to it. This distinction was most apparent in the case of the Ottoman empire. The threat which it presented to its European neighbours had been crucial for international relations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its retreat, after the severe defeats suffered at the hands of Austria during the wars of 1683–1718, was to be no less important during the eighteenth century and especially the period covered by this study. Yet it only began to become part of the diplomatic network during the 1790s, and its entry was at first hesitant and incomplete.

In its essentials this international system survived down to the Seven Years War of 1756–63. This was the first western and central European conflict for almost a century which was not primarily about the power of France but that of the upstart Hohenzollern monarchy. It witnessed the emergence of two new leading states, Prussia and Russia. By the 1770s their status had increased, and the so-called 'Pentarchy' of Russia, Prussia, Austria, Britain and France had come into existence. With the addition of the newly unified Italy from the 1860s, these states would collectively dominate European diplomacy down to the First World War. The nineteenth-century international system had important foundations during the eighteenth century as well as in the struggle against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France.³ Though the emergence of the eastern powers was quite central for the development of modern international relations and has been noted by previous scholars, it has not hitherto been the subject of a separate monograph.⁴ This neglect has been encouraged by the established tendency for scholars to produce studies of national foreign policies or bilateral diplomatic relations, which has the effect of obscuring broader changes within the states system. This book by contrast is explicitly conceived within the international history tradition. It rests upon the conviction that the trajectory of an individual state can only be fully understood in the

² See Derek McKay and H.M. Scott, *The Rise of the Great Powers 1648–1815* (London, 1983), chs. 1–6, for this view of its evolution.

³ Our understanding of the international order at this period has been transformed by the remarkable and distinguished study by Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994).

⁴ See in particular Heinz Duchhardt, *Balance of Power und Pentarchie: Internationale Beziehungen 1700–1785* (Paderborn, 1997), esp. chs. 1, 2:i, 6 and 7: this is now the best introduction to the eighteenth-century international system; Johannes Kunisch, 'Der Aufstieg neuer Großmächte im 18. Jahrhundert und die Aufteilung der Machtsphären Ostmitteleuropa', in Grete Klingenstein and Franz A.J. Szabo, eds., *Staatskanzler Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg 1711–1794* (Graz, 1996), pp. 70–89.

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context of other national foreign policies and the wider evolution of the European system. Though its principal focus is the eastern powers, their emergence is linked to changes in the position and priorities of France and even Britain. It aims to be a study of the entire international system at a decisive point in its evolution.

The rise of Prussia and Russia was brought about by their military victories and territorial gains, in which Austria also shared. Their annexations were accomplished at the expense of the once great and still extensive, but now vulnerable, states of the eastern half of the continent, Poland and the Ottoman empire. These developments, together with France's decline and Britain's insular policies and domestic and colonial preoccupations, conferred diplomatic leadership in Europe upon 'the great military powers', and they were to retain this throughout the next generation. During the 1770s the eastern monarchies, led by Russia, became the continent's most dynamic states. They partitioned Poland in 1772, annexing almost 30 per cent of her territory and 35 per cent of her population. Two years later Russia ended a highly successful war with the Ottoman empire (1768–74) by a dictated peace at Kuchuk-Kainardji, securing sweeping gains to the north of the Black Sea. In the following year Austria plundered the province of Bukovina from the defeated Ottoman empire. These were the most dramatic territorial changes of the entire century and were only to be eclipsed in the 1790s, when Poland was partitioned out of existence and Revolutionary France expanded dramatically by means of successful military imperialism. Eighteenth-century Europe had seen relatively few major changes in political geography, and none on the scale of the 1770s. The Baltic map had been redrawn after the Great Northern War (1700–21), with the emerging state of Russia securing the lion's share of the Swedish empire, which was split up, while in the 1740s Prussia had seized the wealthy province of Silesia from the Austrian Habsburgs. These changes, however, were eclipsed by the scale and importance of the territorial gains made by the three eastern powers in 1772–5. Russia's annexations were particularly striking and suggested that, for the present at least, she was the continent's most expansionist and powerful state.

Throughout the 1770s and beyond, the eastern powers were to grow in confidence and to exhibit increasing initiative and independence. Their emergence was the crucial development in eighteenth-century European diplomacy. It was still incomplete in 1775, and it did not begin overnight in 1756. These dates, however, are the most satisfactory chronological limits for this study. Before the Seven Years War, Prussia and, in a different way, Russia were marginal to the operation of Europe's states system.⁵ By the 1770s they had been fully incorporated and the Pentarchy had come into existence. The eastern powers had secured political parity with the states further west. The Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–74 was the first such struggle for a century not to be concluded through western diplomatic intervention, which was proffered but rejected. Throughout the fighting after 1768 the Empress

⁵ See below, pp. 14–28.

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Catherine II (1762–96) had successfully eluded all attempts at outside mediation and had retained freedom of action, which enabled her to translate Russia's impressive military victories into striking territorial and political gains. During the Anglo-Bourbon War of 1778–83, the eastern powers, and especially Russia and Austria, themselves sought to mediate in a struggle involving the western states. This was a complete reversal of the pattern hitherto, that of diplomatic intervention by the dominant western states in the conflicts of eastern and southern Europe, and it epitomised the transformation which had taken place.

The political and territorial changes were viewed with alarm and resentment both in Britain and France, where Jenkinson's lament was a familiar theme. The English man of letters Horace Walpole described the Polish partition as 'the most impudent association of robbers that ever existed', while the Scottish philosopher David Hume lamented that 'the two most civilised nations, the English and the French, should be on the decline; and the barbarians, the Goths and Vandals of Germany and Russia, should be rising in power and influence'.⁶ Official circles in London in some measure shared this concern. It was not that British ministers were greatly exercised by Poland's fate. That country was remote, Catholic and long viewed as a French client.⁷ The extent of British indifference to Russian expansion at the expense of the Ottoman empire can be gauged from the fact that, when news of Kuchuk-Kainardji arrived, the cabinet was not even summoned back from its summer holidays to discuss the treaty's implications.⁸ The dramatic territorial changes in themselves did not alarm ministers, long accustomed to view eastern Europe as distant and involving no significant British interests, and preoccupied with internal and colonial problems, particularly in North America. Yet the political realignment which accompanied and facilitated their territorial annexations caused concern. The novel unity of the eastern powers appeared to threaten London's own diplomacy, which aimed to manipulate continental rivalries to secure allies against France.

The impact on the other side of the English Channel was greater and also more immediate. Indeed, traditional Anglo-French rivalry ensured that British observers viewed the events of the 1770s primarily as a defeat for Versailles. Walpole crowed at 'the affronts offered to France, where this partition treaty was not even notified. How that formidable monarchy is fallen, debased.'⁹ The French crown had long

⁶ *The Last Journals of Horace Walpole during the Reign of George III, from 1771 to 1783*, ed. A.F. Steuart (2 vols., London, 1910), I. 159; D.B. Horn, *British Public Opinion and the First Partition of Poland* (Edinburgh, 1945), pp. 18–19.

⁷ This latter judgement was certainly exaggerated and probably mistaken. Though France remained influential, Poland had been a Russian puppet since the first decade of the eighteenth century. British observers, however, always viewed European issues through the lens of Anglo-French rivalry and thereby exaggerated Versailles' influence.

⁸ H.M. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 178–80, 195.

⁹ To Sir Horace Mann, 1 July 1772, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis (48 vols., New Haven, CT, 1937–83), XXIII. 419–20.

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been the protector and friend of both Poland and the Ottoman empire. These two countries, together with Sweden, comprised the famous *barrière de l'est*, by which French diplomacy had sought to contain first its established Austrian Habsburg rival and then the rising power of Russia. The fact that these two states had been allies during the generation after 1726 strengthened Versailles' efforts to shut the Russian empire out of Europe: any further move westwards could only strengthen France's enemy Austria and menace her own clients, above all Sweden.¹⁰ Versailles had supporters in Poland and traditionally exercised significant influence at Constantinople, but during the 1770s it could do nothing to prevent the first partition, and was even prepared to sacrifice the Ottoman empire to the wider interests of French policy.

France was a continental state and could not simply withdraw from European diplomacy, as her island rival at times appeared to do. In 1772–3 concern at the Polish partition, and at the unprecedented co-operation between the three eastern powers which made it possible, led to an attempted *rapprochement* with Britain, in order to restore the western states' political leadership of Europe. This secret initiative failed, principally because the British government was unwilling and, perhaps, unable to face the repercussions of such a dramatic step as an alliance with the national enemy. With hindsight it is clear that the initiative by France's foreign minister, the duc d'Aiguillon, was never likely to succeed. The Franco-British negotiations were significant primarily because they revealed the common predicament of the two western powers by the early 1770s.¹¹

Each had been marginalised by the eastern Leviathans and now exerted little influence on the continent. This was fully apparent to the comte de Vergennes, who became France's foreign minister in July 1774. Vergennes was a career diplomat who had served both in Constantinople (1756–68) and in Stockholm (1771–4).¹² In each post he had been forced to confront Russia's new power at first hand, and he also recognised the wider international transformation of which her rise was part. His own background as a member of Louis XV's private diplomatic network, known as the *secret du roi*, with its anti-Russian purpose, was here important, as were the traditions of the *barrière de l'est*: French opposition to Russia was one of the few constants of the eighteenth-century international system. A major aim of Vergennes' policy came to be that of curbing and, if possible, reversing the political and territorial gains made by the eastern monarchies. Louis XVI's foreign minister was concerned at their new power and alarmed at its implications. Austria had been France's ally since 1756, but her growing intimacy with Russia and Prussia threatened – if it did not actually destroy – this alliance and thus weakened France's position in Europe. Vergennes also disliked the destruction both of the balance of power and of

¹⁰ See the Instructions for the Marquis de la Chétardie, 1 July 1739, and for the Marquis de l'Hôpital, 28 Dec. 1756, both in *Recueil des Instructions données aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France, depuis les traités de Westphalie jusqu'à la Révolution Française* (32 vols. to date, Paris, 1884–): *Russie*, ed. A. Rambaud, I, 341, 344–5; II, 32–3.

¹¹ See below, ch. 8, for a fuller account.

¹² There is an informative biography by Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution 1719–1787* (Albany, NY, 1982).

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what would later be known as the ‘Public Law of Europe’, that matrix of established conventions and dynastic and legal rights which regulated the international conduct of nation states. This had been the consequence of the Polish partition, the product of ‘brigandage politique’, which he believed had established power, not right, as the main determinant of diplomacy.¹³ This view was shared by the Earl of Suffolk, Britain’s Northern Secretary, who declared that the partition had established the ‘Law of the Strongest’.¹⁴

These and similar comments by western observers were, at one level, inspired by a recognition of their own diminished importance. Both Britain and, in a different way, France were casualties of the eastern powers’ emergence. The diplomatic leadership which they had enjoyed and exploited since the decades around 1700 was first challenged during the Seven Years War and then undermined after 1763. The transformation was no less apparent to Russia, Prussia and Austria, whose leaders appreciated their own enhanced role. It was recognised with particular clarity by Prussia’s Frederick the Great, who in February 1772 – as the partition of Poland took shape – penned a brief and lucid analysis of the end of Anglo–French political hegemony. On hearing of the attempted *rapprochement* between the two western powers, he wrote: ‘France and England can only console each other over the loss of their influence which had hitherto been dominant within the wider European states system. They retain only the memory of this dominance, and now lack any influence at all.’¹⁵ There was, characteristically, both exaggeration and malice in the King’s explanation: it was, he said, ‘a natural consequence of their weakness’. His fundamental analysis, however, was well founded. In the previous year Frederick had actually claimed that Europe’s only great powers were now Russia and Prussia, and perhaps Austria.¹⁶ The Emperor Joseph II, during a conversation with the Prussian minister in Vienna extolling the merits of a Triple Alliance, threw out the remarkable notion that the eastern half of the continent should become closed to the western states. The partitioning powers should draw a line from the Adriatic to the Baltic, declare it to be their unique sphere of influence, and permit no outside interference within that zone.¹⁷ The Prussian King’s brother, Prince Henry, went even further, claiming that they would henceforth determine Europe’s entire political destiny, if only they could create an enduring Triple Alliance.¹⁸ By the early 1770s the eastern powers gave the law to the continent: as Russia’s foreign minister, Nikita Panin,

¹³ See, e.g., his ‘Mémoire’ of Dec. 1774, given to the new King Louis XVI: this is printed in Ségur, *Politique de tous les cabinets*, I, 158–70: the quotation is at p. 159.

¹⁴ Quoted by Beales, *Joseph II*, p. 299.

¹⁵ To Sandoz Rollin (Prussian agent in Paris), 7 Feb. 1772, *Pol. Corr.*, xxxi, 737. Sandoz Rollin had reported on the growing Anglo–French *rapprochement* on 26 Jan. 1772: *Pol. Corr.*, xxxi, 737.

¹⁶ To Solms (minister in St Petersburg), 20 Feb. 1771, *SIRIO*, xxxvii, 393–6.

¹⁷ Edelsheim to Frederick II, 8 Sept. 1772, GStAPK Rep. 96.47.K. Prussia’s King ignored this hint: *Pol. Corr.*, xxxii, 490–1.

¹⁸ Soloviev, *History of Russia*, XLVIII, 21–2; *Pol. Corr.*, xxxii, 16–17. Frederick, it should be said, was considerably more realistic, recognising that a struggle between Prussia and Austria for influence in St Petersburg would be inevitable: see below, ch. 8.

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explicitly noted in February 1772, as the initial treaty partitioning Poland was being signed, a view which was echoed by Maria Theresa six years later.¹⁹

These changes expanded the international system eastwards, incorporating areas on Europe's periphery which had hitherto lain beyond its operations. Russia's full entry during Catherine II's reign was the most immediate symptom of this expansion.²⁰ The emergence of the eastern powers, however, involved rather more than a geographical extension of the international system, with a corresponding increase in the number of leading states from three to five. It was also central to a far more fundamental transformation: the establishment of a European great power system which would endure until the twentieth century.²¹ The archaeology of words and terms is a notoriously difficult and elusive subject, and one where precision is impossible. It appears, however, that the third quarter of the eighteenth century was the period at which the term and, more important, the modern concept of 'great power' definitively entered the political lexicon.²² This was linked to a simultaneous

¹⁹ *SIRIO*, xxxvii. 643; cf. Soloviev, *History of Russia*, xlVIII. 25, for a similar view in summer 1772. For Maria Theresa, see her letter to Mercy-Argenteau, 30 June 1778, *MT-MA*, III. 326.

²⁰ See below, ch. 5.

²¹ Though he did not explore the origins of the term, Leopold von Ranke's seminal essay on 'The Great Powers' remains fundamental to the development of the concept. It was first published in the *Historische Politische Zeitschrift*, vol. 2, for 1833, and can be found in English translation, in T.H. von Laue, *Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years* (Princeton, NJ, 1950), pp. 181–218. On the formative impact of nineteenth-century historiography and Ranke in particular on approaches to the study of early modern international relations, there are some suggestive remarks in Ulrich Muhlack, 'Das europäische Staatensystem in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung des 19. Jahrhunderts', *Annali dell' Istituto Storico Germanico in Trento* 16 (1990), pp. 43–90. On the wider development there are some interesting reflections in F.H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge, 1963), chs. 8–9, and in Arno Strohmeyer, *Theorie der Interaktion: das europäische Gleichgewicht der Kräfte in der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 1994), esp. ch. 6.

²² Numerous instances of the use of the term 'great power' or 'great powers' can be given. See, for example: J.H.G. von Justi, *Die Chimäre des Gleichgewichts von Europa* (Altona, 1758), p. 86; Bielfeld, *Institutions politiques*, II. 20, 23, 39; Rohan Butler, *Choiseul*, vol. I: *Father and Son, 1719–1754* (Oxford, 1980), 333 (de Bussy (French envoy in London) reporting a conversation with Carteret in 1742); Adolf Beer, 'Denkschriften des Fürsten Wenzel Kaunitz-Rittberg', *AÖG* 48 (1872), pp. 1–162, at p. 61 (Kaunitz in 1755); L. Jay Oliva, *Misalliance: A Study of French Policy in Russia during the Seven Years War* (New York, 1964), 143 (Choiseul in 1759); BL Egerton 1862, fo. 105 (Sir Joseph Yorke (British minister at The Hague) in 1761); AAE CP (Autriche) 304, fo. 131 (Châtelet (French ambassador in Vienna) in 1766); *Pol. Corr.*, xxv. 137 (Sir Andrew Mitchell (British minister in Berlin) in 1766); *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, pp. 622, 646 (Frederick the Great in 1768; in its predecessor, completed in 1752, the King employed the phrase 'grandes puissances' but the concept seems less well developed: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, p. 334); *SIRIO*, cxxxv. 237 (Panin in 1774). On the general meaning of 'Macht' and 'puissance' at this period, see the entry by Karl-Georg Faber in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (8 vols., Stuttgart, 1972–97), III. 882–8. At the close of the seventeenth century, the word 'Großmacht' had been the German translation of the Latin 'summum imperium': Brunner *et al.*, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, p. 930 n. 748. This meaning was to be enduring. During the Seven Years War the *Encyclopédie* noted that 'puissance' was a synonym for authority (*pouvoir*) as well as an assessment of strength within the international system: Article 'Puissance' in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné* (17 vols., Paris, 1751–65), XIII. 556.

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change in the nature of international relations. By the 1760s and 1770s the notion of five states collectively dominating European politics and imposing themselves on the other members of the international system was becoming established.²³ The concept of great power – like the associated emergence of the Pentarchy – belongs to the second half of the eighteenth century and not, as is often still argued, to the Napoleonic era.²⁴

This change was rooted in a new and quite different conception of political power. The very notion of ‘great powers’ underlined the extent to which a state’s standing within the international hierarchy was now being assessed both with greater precision and relative to that of other participants. A ‘great power’ was simply one that could be recognised to be relatively much stronger and therefore to dominate its lesser rivals.²⁵ The potential of individual monarchies and thus their international standing had always been assessed, but in fairly general terms such as geographical extent, population, wealth and military strength. Success within the early modern system had been measured primarily in terms of military victories and the conquest of new territories to which these led. During the eighteenth century a more modern notion of power came to be developed, particularly in central Europe.²⁶ This conception was above all relative: a function of one state’s strength in relation to that of its competitors. Such measurements were now made with rather greater precision and took account of the available economic, demographic and even geographical resources in order to calculate that country’s potential power. This in turn depended upon a related development during the second half of the eighteenth century: the appearance of the distinctively German science of ‘statistics’ (*Staatenkunde*), which, by collecting reliable quantitative information, facilitated such calculations of relative international strength and which replaced the established juridical framework of public affairs.²⁷

²³ See, e.g., Panin’s revealing comments in 1774: *SIRIO*, cxxxv. 237.

²⁴ See, e.g., Karl-Georg Faber, in Brunner *et al.*, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, III. 930–1. The Congress of Vienna and the settlement it produced were the first occasion upon which the great powers formally assumed international leadership and the responsibilities attached to this: Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, p. 155.

²⁵ As Justi explicitly noted: *Die Chimäre des Gleichgewichts*, pp. 19, 86.

²⁶ See the major study by Harm Klueting, *Die Lehre von der Macht der Staaten: das aussenpolitische Machtproblem in der ‘politischen Wissenschaft’ und in der praktischen Politik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1986). There is a notable review of this book by Grete Klingenstein in *English Historical Review* 103 (1988), pp. 134–8. It seems to me that Prof. Klingenstein is quite correct to insist that the real origin of the transformation is less cameralist theory, as Prof. Klueting suggests, than books IX and X of Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* (1748). See Grete Klingenstein, “Jede Macht ist relativ”: Montesquieu und die Habsburger Monarchie”, in Herwig Ebner *et al.*, eds., *Festschrift Othmar Pickl* (Graz, 1987), pp. 307–24. There is a penetrating discussion of Bielfeld and especially Justi from a rather different perspective in Keith Tribe, *Governing Economy: The Reformation of German Economic Discourse 1750–1840* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 4.

²⁷ This connection was underlined by Hertzberg at the very beginning of his *Réflexions sur la force des Etats et sur leur Puissance relative et proportionnelle* of Jan. 1782. This is printed in his *Huit dissertations . . . lues dans les assemblées publiques de l’Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres de Berlin, tenues pour l’anniversaire du roi Frédéric dans les années 1780–1787* (Berlin, 1787), p. 87.

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This approach was first elaborated, particularly during the 1750s, by cameralist writers among whom Justi and Bielfeld were the most prominent. Johann Heinrich Gottlieb von Justi (1720–71) was the better known of the two men. He served the governments of Austria, Hanover, Denmark and finally Prussia, and set out his ideas in a series of writings, principal among which were the *Staatswirtschaft oder Systematische Abhandlung aller Oekonomischen und Cameral-wissenschaften* of 1755 and a highly sceptical essay on the idea of the balance of power, *Die Chimäre des Gleichgewichts von Europa*, first published in 1758. Jakob Friedrich von Bielfeld (1717–70) was originally a Hamburg merchant's son. He entered Prussian service, had a brief career as a diplomat and acted as tutor to Frederick the Great's younger brother, Ferdinand, before publishing his *Institutions politiques* in 1760.²⁸

Both writers emphasised the centrality of economics to calculations of power, which was a novel development. They also stressed that the international standing of a state ultimately rested upon its internal strength, coherence and organisation: an approach reflected in the widespread efforts at domestic reform and reconstruction, after the destructive Seven Years War.²⁹ Such assessments were not purely quantitative but possessed a qualitative dimension. The scale and efficiency of government, the extent to which natural resources were exploited and even the moral condition of a ruler's subjects were all important elements in the calculation of a state's potential power.³⁰ These ideas, moreover, had a considerable and surprisingly rapid impact on practical statecraft. Immediately incorporated into the teaching of cameralism in Austrian and German universities, they influenced internal government and foreign policy. The two individuals who stand at the heart of this present study, the Prussian King Frederick the Great and Austria's leading minister Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, were both strongly influenced by the new thinking, as was one of Frederick's leading foreign policy advisers, Ewald Friedrich Graf von Hertzberg.³¹ The impact of such ideas, and of the notion that power could be accurately calculated, was to be clearly evident during the negotiations which determined the precise annexations from Poland in 1772–3.³² These were to be

²⁸ The first edition (The Hague, 1760) announced that it would be supplemented by a political gazetteer. This was eventually included in a three-volume edition under an identical title (Leiden, 1767–72), of which it comprised vol. III, in two parts, though it had been completed by 1757, when the exigencies of the Seven Years War forced Bielfeld to take refuge in his native Hamburg: 3rd edn, I, xvi–xvii. All references to the *Institutions politiques* in the present study are to the first edition, unless otherwise indicated. ²⁹ See below, ch. 3.

³⁰ See, e.g., the overlapping discussions in Bielfeld, *Institutions politiques*, II, 78–97; Justi, *Die Chimäre des Gleichgewichts*, pp. 27–58, and the article 'Puissance' in Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, XIII, 556–7.

³¹ Kluebing, *Die Lehre von der Macht der Staaten*, pp. 138–273; Frederick's Political Testaments of 1752 and 1768 (printed in *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich), reflect this approach; for the Chancellor, see below, pp. 78–82. In 1782 Hertzberg provided a succinct introduction to such thinking in his lecture to the Berlin Academy: *Réflexions sur la force des Etats et sur leur Puissance relative et proportionnelle*. The *Institutions politiques* was also translated into Russian (1768–75) and was a significant source of Catherine II's domestic policies, as were the writings of Justi: Claus Scharf, *Katharina II., Deutschland und die Deutschen* (Mainz, 1995), pp. 124–30. ³² See below, ch. 7.

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characterised, on the part of all three participants, by an attempt to calculate and thus to equalise the ‘political worth’ (*valeur politique*) of each share of the Polish gains. While such ideas were becoming important, during the third quarter of the eighteenth century they overlaid rather than replaced traditional approaches to the conduct of international relations.

In November 1760 France’s foreign minister the duc de Choiseul produced a celebrated analysis of the international order which was also an epitaph for an era which was closing:

Colonies, commerce, and the maritime power which accrues from them [he wrote] will decide the balance of power upon the continent. Austria, Russia and the King of Prussia are only second class powers, like all other who can make war only when they are subsidised by the commercial powers, which are France, England, Spain and Holland.³³

Choiseul’s argument was exaggerated and his purpose was polemical: he went on to find one explanation of French failures in the Seven Years War in the fact that ‘France bears the brunt of this rivalry and protects the commerce of Europe against English ambition’. His fundamental analysis, however, can be broadly accepted as an explanation of the working of the European states system from the close of the fifteenth century until the mid-eighteenth century. The politically dominant states during the early modern period had mainly been located along the continent’s western periphery and had benefited from the access this gave to trade and overseas possessions. Spain’s ascendancy during her Golden Age had been heavily dependent upon the wealth of her empire and had also been based upon France’s prolonged weakness during the two generations after 1559, while the seventeenth-century emergence of the Dutch Republic had been made possible by the prosperity created by its extensive commercial and financial activities, in Europe as well as overseas. France’s hegemony under Louis XIV, like her domination of western Europe under his successor Louis XV, had been founded upon unrivalled demographic and economic strength together with the weakness of Spain and Austria, while Britain’s spectacular eighteenth-century emergence was supported by commercial and financial expansion and the wealth and power this conferred. Two exceptions to this general rule were the peripheral states of Poland-Lithuania and Sweden, both of which enjoyed periods of political importance in spite of the limited resources at their disposal. Though Sweden’s basic poverty had not prevented her dramatic seventeenth-century rise, her equally rapid decline at the beginning of the eighteenth century highlighted the crucial lack of demographic and economic resources. It was only to be during the third quarter of the eighteenth century that the political leadership exercised by the states along the Atlantic seaboard was decisively overturned, with the emergence of the eastern powers which Jenkinson had highlighted.

³³ This is quoted by Alan Christelow, ‘Economic Background of the Anglo-Spanish War of 1762’, *Journal of Modern History* 18 (1946), pp. 22–36, at p. 26.